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# PINK GLOVES STILL GIVE BLACK EYES

EXPLORING 'ALTERNATIVE' FEMININITY IN WOMEN'S COMBAT SPORTS

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the gendered significance of women's participation in combat sports, with a specific focus on the performances of femininity by female combat athletes. Against lines of argument which posit that women's enactment of femininity is the result of restrictive, coercive, and ultimately conservative cultural pressures, respondents in two separate studies suggested that a purposeful, selective enactment of femininity, when understood in combination with their fighting ability, signified an important challenge to orthodox understandings of gender. As such, our data suggests that manoeuvring within normative cultural parameters of gender may, ironically, help to stimulate change in its structure of meanings, given that the feminine performances of these fighters ultimately posed symbolic challenges to cultural constructions of ('normal') women as inevitably weaker and inferior athletes compared to men. We therefore advocate that scholars with an interest in exploring the subversion of gender remain mindful of the possibility that such subversive impulses might occur via the appropriation, and re-signification, of some of its more orthodox norms.

## INTRODUCTION

### WOMEN, COMBAT SPORTS, AND GENDER

Much has been written over the past two decades about the experiences of women participating in martial arts and combat sports (MACS) of various kinds [e.g., Guthrie 1995; Halbert 1997; McCaughey 1997; Mennesson 2000; Hollander 2004; Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009; Lökman 2010; Paradis 2012; Mierzwinski et al. 2014; Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015; Jennings 2015; Kavoura et al. 2015; Channon and Matthews 2015a; see also Follo 2012 and Channon and Jennings 2014 for wider reviews of this literature]. A significant amount of the scholarly work concerning these female martial artists, boxers, wrestlers, and self-defence practitioners has echoed themes prominent within the broader field of research on women's sport, identifying in particular the 'empowering' experiences of female fighters and the broader, gender-subversive potential involved with these phenomena [e.g., Hargreaves 1997; McCaughey 1998; De Welde 2003; Noel 2009; McNaughton 2012; Velija et al. 2013].

This is unsurprising given the gendered character of combat-oriented activities in general and MACS in particular. Commonly viewed as 'quintessentially masculine' [see Mennesson 2000 and Gammel 2012], such activities often serve as cultural sites through which masculinity is symbolically articulated as the male embodiment of strength, toughness, and physical power [Matthews 2016]. Thus, women's successful entry into these symbolically 'masculine' spaces has the potential to pose particularly dramatic challenges to wider social discourses of male superiority, owing to the way in which female fighting ability and the combat-ready female body destabilise patriarchal gender norms and women's concurrent symbolic subordination to men [Hargreaves 1997; McCaughey 1997; Gammel 2012; Channon and Matthews 2015b]. In this respect, much research into women in MACS strikes an optimistic tone, with scholars frequently advocating women's participation as a potential source of individual empowerment and also wider, progressive social change.

However, analyses of these phenomena have also drawn attention to the problematic nature of women's engagement in MACS. Firstly, objections to women's embodiment of the 'violence' implied by MACS involvement, with respect to its links to masculine domination and the destructive character of gender oppression, has been noted by some scholars [e.g., McCaughey 1997; Lafferty and McKay 2004]. However, this political critique is itself often problematized by pro-MACS feminist scholars (by way of, for instance, McCaughey's [1997] conception of 'physical feminism') and has had little impact on the

broader research base in this area. Secondly, and far more widely noted, has been the tendency for men (or women themselves) to resist or counteract the gender-subversive potential of women's MACS practice in numerous ways. Such resistance can come in the form of passive or overt opposition to participation [e.g., Lafferty & McKay 2004; Hollander 2009] but more commonly involves modes of practice and/or representation which reify, rather than challenge, hierarchal gender relations [Hargreaves 1997; Paradis 2012; Channon and Jennings 2013; Weaving 2014]. In this latter respect, the ways in which practitioners 'do' gender is of particular importance in mediating the potentially transformative consequences of women's integration into an otherwise ostensibly 'masculine' cultural sphere.

The performance of femininity by women within MACS has thus been the subject of scholarly discussion. Often, female fighters' embodiment of femininity is considered somewhat oppositional to, or even incompatible with, their development of fighting skills [Halbert 1997; McCaughey 1998; Guérandel and Mennesson 2007; Kavoura et al. 2015]; it can also be framed as symbolic of the limited extent to which MACS practices can challenge wider social formations of (hierarchal) gender difference [Mennesson 2000; Velija et al. 2013; Paradis 2014; Weaving 2014]. In this sense, the extant feminist literature on women in MACS, with its overarching commitment to exploring how female practitioners can challenge or subvert women's subordination, has often tended to reaffirm what Jayne Caudwell describes as the general tendency among wider feminist sport sociology to read sportswomen's femininity as 'duped' [Caudwell 2006: 155]. That is to say, performances of femininity tend to be construed as blocking the gender-subversive potential of sport and as evidence of women's passive or coerced conformity with male-centred, heteronormative culture. Such reasoning often supersedes attempts at interrogating how femininities might also be purposefully, reflexively, and perhaps even subversively performed by women in sport; indeed, there has been comparatively little attention paid within MACS research to the ways in which femininity might be actively reinvented or performed in potentially transformative ways [see De Welde 2003].

It is this particular aspect of women's engagement in MACS which our current article seeks to explore; namely, the constructions of femininity among female combat sport athletes, as well as their attendant meanings relative to the central thematic concern of gender subversion through MACS participation. Before turning to this task, it is necessary to provide a fuller explanation of how we are conceptualising 'femininity' in this article.

## THEORISING FEMININITY IDENTITY, PERFORMANCE, AND POWER

Adopting a critical social constructionist position, we argue that femininity is best viewed as a culturally specific, dynamic, and internally diverse construct. Rather than a fixed set of characteristics arising from and residing within individuals, femininity is discursively constituted and performatively manifested – i.e., it is something which people socially learn and actively ‘do’ relative to institutionalised structures of meaning [West and Zimmerman 1987]. Typically associated with female bodies and the lives of women, femininity is most readily intelligible when it is considered as oppositional to corresponding constructions of masculinity. However, following Mimi Schippers, we argue against the analytical reduction of femininity to a descriptive label applied to the ‘behaviours of girls and women’ [Schippers 2007: 89]. Moreover, as Maddie Breeze notes, viewing femininity as ‘anything that women happen to do’ [Breeze 2010: 129] reduces the utility of the term, both as a way of understanding gender as conceptually separate from sex and as a means of grasping the power dynamics often embedded within men’s and women’s gender practices.

In this sense, naming something as ‘feminine’ must involve an evaluation of the sociological relevance of the word. What, exactly, does ‘femininity’ (or for that matter ‘masculinity’) help us to understand about people’s lives, and to what ends do we use this word to describe them or their behaviour? Our answers to these questions take inspiration from Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s [1987] influential ‘doing gender’ approach, which posits that feminine gender performance serves to socially mark people as ‘women’. In this model, men and women are recognised as such owing to the convincing presentation of a correspondingly gendered self, which is evaluated according to prevailing cultural norms. In lieu of their biological sex being known by others, if a person performs femininity to an appropriate extent then that person will be socially recognised as a woman.<sup>1</sup> In the context of continual gender assessment (or

1 To elaborate a little further, we recognise that men and/or people with male bodies can and do perform or embody ‘feminine’ behaviours and characteristics and that those things that are culturally considered to be feminine are certainly not the sole preserve of women or females. However, if ‘men’ are being socially recognised as such, it is because they continue to simultaneously deploy masculine signifiers to such an extent that their femininity is insufficient to mark them as ‘women’. Their status as men might be questioned – particularly given that male femininity is often considered indicative of homosexuality, traditionally viewed as anathema to ‘true’ masculinity [see for instance Kimmel 1994] – but they nevertheless continue to be socially categorised as men despite the mediating influence of an atypical gender performance. There is certainly more that could be said around the phenomenon of male femininity but, for lack of space, it is beyond the scope of this present article to do so.

‘accountability’), femininity thus becomes an important way of achieving socially acceptable womanhood. Exactly what type of woman a person is socially recognised as being will be mediated by the specifics of that person’s gender performance and the interaction of femininity with other identity categories (such as ethnicity, age, social class, nationality and sexuality, to name a few), but the resulting multiplicity of femininities shares an orientation towards substantiating a public identity of ‘woman’.

Meanwhile, critical theorists such as Raewyn Connell [1987] understand constructions of femininity – particularly when such constructions are embodied by women – as lending themselves to the subordination of women. This is most often the case when femininity is constructed as oppositional to masculinity in hierarchal, complementary relationships [Connell 1987; Weedon 1999; Bourdieu 2001].<sup>2</sup> Typically, those things thought of as masculine (e.g., rationality, physical strength, etc.) are more culturally valued than those counterpoised qualities constructed as feminine (e.g., emotionality, physical weakness, etc.). Collectively, this value system makes ‘the relationship articulated through the quality content of femininity and masculinity’ the ‘central feature of gender hegemony’ [Schippers 2007: 94]. If (‘real’) men are socially recognised and valued for doing ‘powerful’ things – such as deliberately building their bodies’ strength or being decisive and influential leaders – and (‘real’) women are recognised and valued for doing the opposite – such as reducing the size of their bodies or remaining bound to the domestic sphere – then men’s superiority is rooted in the very acts which socially construct the sex categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ to begin with. Thus, individuals’ performative embodiment of gender constructs more than just social identities; it is also an integral component of the reproduction of sexual inequalities.

### Policing Feminine ‘Normality’ in Sport

Such dynamics have particular relevance for participation in (combat) sports, long associated with both the embodiment and display of power and idealised notions of masculinity [Channon and Matthews 2015b; Mennesson 2000]. According to Judith Butler’s [1990] theory of the heterosexual matrix, female athletes practicing such sports, which most often require them to forgo socially normalised constructions of femininity, risk having their status as ‘real’ women (often conflated with, but not reducible to, being heterosexual) called into question [Tredway 2014]. This is particularly so for women of colour, given the

2 At this point, we are cautious to emphasise the **constructed** nature of hierarchal gender binaries. While it is abundantly clear that gender does not objectively or statically exist in binary form, it is nevertheless often the case that it is socially constructed in this manner.



pervasive whiteness of Western femininity and its historical role in the colonialist project of 'othering' non-White people [see Pieper 2014], but so too has it been a particular problem for 'out' lesbian athletes, whose sexuality has historically been considered to confirm many of the more pernicious myths surrounding women's athleticism as indicative of feminine deficiency. For such athletes, their non-conformity to orthodox visions of femininity may not preclude them from being socially recognised as women – often accomplished through a direct surveillance of their physical bodies [Jakubowska 2013; Pieper 2016] – but their discursive positioning as 'aberrant' or 'deviant' diminishes the symbolic value of their embodiment of apparently masculine qualities [Tredway 2014].

In this sense, because they are unable to count as 'real' or 'normal' women within this heterosexist (and ethnocentric) system of meaning, female athletes' individual appropriation of power through sport avoids troubling the hierarchy maintained through normative gender performance [Griffin 2002]. In other words, what they are capable of is argued to not represent the capacities of other, 'normal' women; at best, they count as 'honorary men', and are thereby dismissed from troubling normative symbolic constructions of male superiority [Griffin 2002; Kavoura et al. 2015]. And thanks to the stigmatising, homophobic conflation of lesbianism with female masculinity often accompanying this process, as well as the historical marginalisation and denigration of homosexuals within sport,<sup>3</sup> participating in 'masculine' sports can present a great deal of 'gender trouble' for women, regardless of their actual sexuality [Lindner 2012].

Those women who nevertheless do participate in culturally masculinised activities thus often find themselves pressured to maintain and display 'enough' femininity to preserve their social status as heterosexual women. Described as the 'female apologetic' [Felshin 1974], many female athletes attempt to 'balance out' the implied masculinity of athleticism with a correspondingly overt performance of femininity – which, historically speaking, is a well-evidenced phenomenon within the sociology of sport [see Hargreaves 1994; Heywood and Dworkin 2003]. On an individual level, this can prevent many women from reaching their athletic potential by limiting their body's development of size or skill [see Dworkin 2001; Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009], while on a broader societal level it often serves to

maintain assumptions about the inherent superiority of the male body and the status of sport as a male preserve [Krane 2001; Meán and Kassing 2008]. In addition, it also shores up the notion that women ought to be sexually desirable to men if they are to be socially valued [Engh 2011], a phenomenon LA Jennings [2015] recently referred to in her historical study of women's combat sports as 'the centrefold imperative'.

### 'Alternative' Sporting Femininities

As such, overt performances of femininity by sportswomen have tended to be broadly positioned as problematic, signifying either direct collusion with male power or an unwillingness to overtly challenge it – something seemingly possible only through women's effectively 'unapologetic' engagement in behaviours thought to constitute masculinity. As noted above, this logic has tended to feature in many studies of women in MACS. However, while such theorising has been commonplace in the sociology of sport, it is also important to allow for the possibility that performances of femininity might, in some contexts, be understood or experienced as a source of resistance against the male-centred gender order rather than always imagined as implicitly supportive of it.

In this respect, the notion of 'alternative femininities' [Schipper 2002; Carlson 2010; Finley 2010] provides conceptual space for describing practices which are intelligible as feminine (i.e., they are socially understood as somehow signifying 'woman') but work *against* the maintenance of male hegemony. This is not to say that any recognisable expression of femininity which departs from orthodox or traditional feminine styles ought to be read as 'alternative', nor that women's apparent embodiment of masculinity should in and of itself be considered 'alternative'. Rather, it is those gendered practices which overtly signify both 'woman' and 'power' which – in our view – constitute a genuinely alternative form of femininity.

Research on women's sport has begun to identify such alternative modes of femininity practiced by a range of female athletes [e.g., Thing 2001; Finley 2010; Hardy 2015], but perhaps the most recent and prolific site for discussion of this phenomenon has been within the scholarly work on women's roller derby. This largely female, full-contact, combative team sport has provided scholars with ample opportunities to explore the construction of alternative femininities due to its woman-centred and woman-led ethos, its overtly feminised (and often sexualised) aesthetic, and the masculine connotations of its physicality. Roller derby thus serves as an interesting example of the potential for women athletes to deliberately adopt overtly feminised styles coupled with visible displays of strength and self-authorisation

<sup>3</sup> Although this is beyond the scope of the present article, recent research has suggested a much less hostile environment for gay and lesbian athletes in many sport settings in Western Europe and North America [see Anderson 2011; Dashper 2012; Cunningham 2012]. However, this does not necessarily mean that heterosexual female athletes are now completely unaffected by the suspicion of lesbianism often attached to female masculinity.

– qualities often assumed as masculine but here reconciled with local constructions of femininity. The extant research on this sport has highlighted the need to examine the degree of agency women claim when embodying (often overtly sexualised) femininities [Beaver 2014], the ways in which feminine signifiers are re-claimed to denote power rather than to balance out the power indicated by masculinity [Carlson 2010], and exactly what can be described as alternative femininity [Breeze 2010; Finley 2010] relative to the concerns about sexual signification, power, and conceptual integrity outlined above.

Similar to these scholars, we found instances in our own research into women's MACS practice wherein women overtly and consciously performed femininity in specific ways, ways which were experienced as both indicative of womanhood and as a means of claiming power, and both for themselves and sometimes on behalf of other women, as well. In the sections that follow, we discuss how women involved in competitive martial arts articulated their understanding of femininity in these ways. Before explaining these findings, though, we offer a brief account of our research methodology.

## METHOD

The data upon which this research is based were taken from two separate qualitative studies which followed similar methods and explored similar themes. The data from the first author's study, which was part of a larger PhD project, are derived from semi-structured interviews with 13 women in the English East Midlands. These participants had at least three years of experience in a variety of different MACS, including kickboxing, muay thai, karate, taekwondo, and mixed martial arts (MMA), amongst others. These interviews took place between 2009 and 2011, lasting approximately one hour [see Channon 2012 for more details]. The data from the second author's study were part of a Master's thesis, which involved semi-structured interviews with 14 women who were professional muay thai fighters and based across the UK, of which five had retired from fighting in the past three years [see Phipps 2013]. All of these participants were classed as professionals, as they had received a purse from fight promoters; furthermore, two of the participants had achieved English titles, two had achieved British titles, and ten had achieved World titles as their highest competitive achievements to date. These interviews took place in mid-2013, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes.

In both studies, the researchers' knowledge of and participation within MACS, along with information from contacts in their respective local gyms/clubs and the use of social networking websites, helped to source participants for the study, while further recruitment was made possible

through the use of chain-referral sampling. While the interviewees in the first study were generally participating at lower competitive levels than those in the second study, this was the only notable variation in the characteristics of either sample with respect to their patterns of participation. Across the studies, participants were aged between 19-38 years old (mean ages of 25 and 29, respectively), all but one self-identified as heterosexual (with one lesbian participant), and most self-identified as White (with British Asian women comprising three participants in the first study and one participant in the second study). Across the combined sample, only two were not British nationals (one being Norwegian, the other Australian), although these participants had both been living, working, and training/competing in England for at least five years prior to interview.<sup>4</sup>

Similar themes were explored in both studies, including initial involvement in their respective disciplines, motivations for on-going participation, questioning the 'masculine' image of MACS, and women's perspectives on expressing/negotiating femininity within their training and competition settings. Similar findings arose from both studies, which formed the basis of the collaboration represented by this article. After discussing phenomena surrounding martial artists' expressions and articulations of femininity during a conference at which both authors were present, a joint analysis was later conducted whereby the authors shared datasets with each other, separately coding each other's work using a deductive coding strategy built upon a synthesis of both authors' separate (but broadly similar) earlier conclusions. Since this analytical framework had arisen from both datasets prior to the collaboration, the deductive coding approach enabled 'working propositions' to be jointly validated by 'returning to the data' [Jones et al. 2013: 92]. With both authors content that the foundations of each other's conclusions were empirically sound and the datasets were suitably comparable, this article was written to represent the shared findings that emerged from these two separate studies.

## FINDINGS

The data discussed in the following sections reveal the ways in which several women involved in competitive combat sports think about, construct, and perform femininity. Our findings reveal a problematisation of the assumed incompatibility of femininity and fighting, in spite of the normalised discursive positioning of combative activities as typically masculine; they suggest that women, as opposed to being/feeling socially compelled to do so, are active agents in choosing

4 Readers should note that all interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity throughout this article.

to embody, identify with, and enjoy being feminine. They also hint at the potential for such women's performances of femininity to destabilise normative sexual hierarchies rather than to uncritically reproduce them.

### Being a Fighter and Being Feminine

Many participants in our studies noted that the martial arts they participated in were considered by others to be 'masculine'. This was particularly the case for the women who practiced full-contact<sup>5</sup> kickboxing, muay thai, and MMA – so-called 'hard' martial arts jointly characterised by a comparatively higher risk of injury and an inclination towards competitive fighting rather than self-defence or any other training goals [see Mierzewski and Phipps 2015]. This is perhaps unsurprising given that, among all MACS, these types of disciplines are highly 'sportised' and are considered to most closely approximate 'real' fighting, two things popularly imagined as the preserve of men [Matthews 2016]. When asked about what they thought of the 'masculine' image of these combat sports, some agreed that this label was fitting in certain respects and were happy to lay claim to having a 'masculine side' themselves. However, most were openly critical of such gendering, arguing that it implied that women did not belong in combat sports or were somehow masculinised or otherwise positioned as 'abnormal' for taking part. The following quotes illustrate these positions:

Within my group of friends, I am kind of like the tomboy one, always have been ... I have got my femininities about me as well, I like to go out and I like to dress up, but when it comes to training, I don't mind being perceived as boyish when it comes to that. (Suzie)

I guess people might think that about me [being masculine] but I wouldn't say so, because I feel like I'm girly and I just do martial arts ... There's a lot of girls fighting [in my club], it just makes it less manly I think. Like, girls are doing it, too, so how can you still call it that? (Sara)

Sometimes you do get those comments – 'Isn't that a bit manly?' – that kind of thing. I just find it's easier to not bother talking about it, otherwise I'll get angry at those people. (Kate)

These positions typified the range of responses given by the women in our studies, and while choosing to tackle the question of implied masculinity in different ways, they were not necessarily at odds with each other in that they all criticised the notion that women in combat sports were automatically masculinised by their participation. Indeed, all of those who claimed to have a 'masculine side' or to be a 'tomboy' also told of their corresponding 'feminine side', such that their involvement in an apparently masculine sport had not made them, in Suzie's words, 'abnormal, or butch, or anything like that'.

Thus, the implication of female masculinity was framed by our participants in ways which suggested that their self-perceived femininity was not correspondingly sacrificed or diminished by their engagement in competitive fighting. This contrasts somewhat with findings from other studies [see Mennesson 2000; Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009; Kavoura et al. 2015]. Nonetheless, that women enjoyed the sensations and significance of these so-called masculine fighting sports, and the changes they had wrought on their bodies, was clearly evidenced by many of our participants:

I'm more confident. I'm bigger, like, more muscly, and it's not like I'm a bodybuilder, but it's enough that I know I'm stronger, and I'm proud of that, definitely. (Jenny)

I am a bit crazy when it comes to fighting, it's true ... I don't know anything that's as close to how much I love this, like, I just love it! I love being able to do this. (Sylvia)

The thing I liked about [muay thai], it were kind of full-on, which fit my personality really, I mean on my first session they let me hit pads and things like that and I thought this is fantastic, it's definitely me. (Chloe)

These things considered then, it was evident that these women largely did not believe that their enjoyment of what are often considered quintessentially masculine activities made them any less able to claim or present a feminine identity. For some, this involved a rejection of the 'masculine' label; for others, it revealed the fluidity of gender. Either way, it was clear that even involvement in high-level competitive fighting did not preclude women from being, feeling, or identifying as 'feminine'. As Beth neatly summarised, 'I wouldn't say to anyone that they have to give up being feminine in order to be a good fighter'.

<sup>5</sup> 'Full-contact' fighting allows opponents to strike without withholding any degree of force, and is a type of competitive engagement which can often end in injuries or knockouts. It chiefly contrasts with 'semi-contact' sparring, where opponents hit less forcefully in order to score points rather than incapacitate one-another.

### Choosing and Enjoying Femininity

When asked more specifically about their own sense of femininity,<sup>6</sup> the interviewees' responses revealed that being feminine was something they actively chose, enjoyed, and were proud of. Thus, when questioned about any perceived need to 'stay feminine' or 'show their femininity' to others, the interviewees' responses complicated any straightforward suggestion of gender behaviour as a social imposition. While some indicated that their feminine performance was oriented towards others in order to claim the public identity of being a woman, this was articulated around a more fundamental project of constituting their own self-identity as women fighters. Illustrative of the deeply social nature of gender construction, the relationship between others' perceptions and the integrity of the self were highlighted [West and Zimmerman 1987]. Thus, while gender was performed in order to be witnessed, the purpose of this performance remained tied to the women's agency, as they aimed to be recognised in the ways that they themselves desired. For Helen and Sylvia:

The more I get into [kickboxing], the more I know myself, understand and appreciate myself, have more self-confidence that isn't just external. It's about finding out who I really am. And I think that I am a woman, and even though I am in a man's world here, doing this so-called man's sport, I don't wanna lose my femininity... I think it's important [for others] to recognise that I am a woman doing this sport, not to just think that I want to be a man doing it. (Helen)

As much as I love fighting, I still love the sense of being a girl. I'm not embarrassed about fighting but I still feel like if I do everything like a guy then it's a bit, like, not right... I don't want [men] to think, 'you're a girl so I'm not going to let you join in', I want them to be as inclusive as possible but still treat me as a girl. (Sylvia)

In this project of constituting themselves as feminine women or girls, not all aspects of what they described as 'traditional' femininity were embraced by our interviewees. Returning to the question of compatibility between being feminine and being a fighter, they were generally critical of apparently feminine behaviours which were directly

at odds with the (particularly embodied) characteristics required of fighters. Here, Emily told of her distaste for the 'bitchy environment' she'd encountered in some clubs, Sara bemoaned image-focused women who were 'worried about getting bruises' and so made poor training partners, and all interviewees argued that the stereotypically genteel, passive vision of femininity, summarised by Beth as embodied by 'Disney movie girls', wasn't compatible with 'serious' involvement in MACS.

However, the strongest criticism in this regard was reserved for women whose performances of femininity involved overtly sexualising themselves, particularly within mixed-sex training environments [see Channon and Jennings 2013]. Beth complained of how one woman she trained with 'held back more than she normally would' when training with a man she was attracted to, 'because [she didn't] want to be aggressive in front of a potential boyfriend' [see Guérandel and Mennesson 2007]. Elsewhere, Rachel criticised those she described as 'groupies' training at her club for giving a poor impression of other women to their male training partners:

Always with the low-cut tops, cleavage falling out, too much makeup on, stuff like that. It's a bit gross ... There are the serious women too and you just have to separate them out from the groupies, who are just there to get laid basically ... What does it say to the guys? It might make them think we're all just there to get laid.

Therefore, it was apparent that the means and methods of defining and presenting feminine selves needed to be matched with the requirements of being capable and legitimate fighters. For many women, this was articulated around feminine behaviours *outside* their MACS practice; for instance, Holly worked as a beauty therapist, Helen practiced and taught pole dancing, Andrea had competed in a beauty pageant, and nearly all of our interviewees mentioned 'dressing up and going out'<sup>7</sup> as something they regularly enjoyed doing. However, *within* their training environments, adopting specifically feminine styles and aesthetics allowed the women to signify their femininity directly in conjunction with their identity as fighters. Here, wearing their long hair in 'fighter-style' cornrows or braids, adopting feminised but fearsome nicknames as fighters, or indeed, wearing pink fighting gear, illustrated the more overt manifestations of femininity within the combat sports milieu:

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, of course, that such questions were not phrased using the academic language deployed in this article, and the issue of one's own femininity often arose through discussion of 'the (gendered) image' of martial arts, or following participants' accounts of the 'girly' behaviours of other women, etc. Indirectly approaching this topic seemed to be the best way to avoid the issue being discussed in overly analytical and abstract ways, focusing instead on participants' actual behaviours and impressions of self.

<sup>7</sup> Contextually speaking, this implied wearing women's fashions and makeup, and drinking and dancing in pubs and nightclubs – presumably, given the largely heterosexual character of our sample, in the company of men.



I just want to have a bit of girliness in [my fighting], so I have these hot pink gloves, they're so cool! ... Yeah, I generally dress quite sporty but I always try to keep something, just a little something that makes it a bit feminine. (Sylvia)

Yeah, some people joke about it, these [pink] gloves I mean, but pink or black or whatever, it still hurts when they hit! (Suzie)

I wear, like, girls' gym clothes and I have the pink gloves, lots of girls have that, it's just a little thing you do to be like, I dunno, a bit less mannish ... But it's all good, isn't it? Pink gloves still give black eyes, after all! (Keeley)

In this sense, several women in our studies embraced feminine aesthetics as signifiers of their identities as women, and their example provides an interesting perspective from which to consider criticism of the 'feminisation' of combat sports implied by, for instance, pink boxing gloves [see Kalman-Lamb 2012] or, perhaps more controversially, the use of skirts for competitive boxers' uniforms [van Ingen and Kovacs 2012; Paradis 2014]. Yet, the notion that stylistic adornments, along with other performative and embodied manifestations of femininity, could actually work for the betterment of women's position in MACS represents the most compelling finding of our studies.

### Femininity as Useful

Rather than viewing their femininity as simply an enjoyable or otherwise positive aspect of their social identity, several of the interviewees in both studies highlighted ways in which being feminine whilst also being a fighter could be a useful way to advance women's interests both within and outside of their sports. Similar to Christy Halbert's [1997] observation that women boxers strategically used femininity to maintain the commercial viability of their sport [see also Trimbur 2013], some women argued that retaining an appearance of femininity helped to encourage female membership of their clubs, ensuring enough women were attracted to sustain their future development. Many interviewees suggested that their own feminine appearance and style helped avoid 'putting off' newer or younger women who might be joining their clubs by undermining intimidating stereotypes of MACS as activities purely for tough men or overtly masculine women. Furthermore, Emily argued that such a 'softer', feminised image could broaden the appeal of certain MACS disciplines to men as well as women:

I think that girls in the UK have done a better job for [muay thai] than men have, and I think that's because of that difference from what the general public think [muay thai]

people should look like or be like, it's not what the [muay thai] women are like at all. And I think that makes the sport [seem] softer, more accessible I guess for the general population.

Similarly, interviewees often noted that developing greater female participation in their sports could be achieved by including what were thought to be feminised practices, such as self-defence classes or 'fitness-oriented' sessions, in their clubs' programs [Channon and Matthews 2015b]. It should be noted that many in our samples rejected the suggestion that training for fitness or self-defence were their own primary goals, preferring to identify as competitive athletes instead, while some were critical of ever advertising MACS to women by way of emphasising specifically 'feminine' practices [see Jennings 2015]. However, despite some disagreement, it was nevertheless accepted by the majority of our interviewees that this was an effective way to initiate women into wider MACS participation:

I promote it as self-defence to women, because if you say 'martial arts' they just think of fighting, it's perceived as violent, you know, punching someone and kicking someone, and they don't like that. So if you say self-defence it sounds more like something they might want to do. (Evelyn)

However, several interviewees argued that presenting a feminine identity for MACS, or as individual fighters, was useful for more than just developing participation. Both within and outside of the context of their sports, the fact that they were high-level competitive fighters in addition to being recognisably feminine women carried something of a shock value that could at once challenge received wisdom about gender normality whilst also having positive consequences for their competitive performance:

It's quite a surprise to find a female who's a professional fighter and everything else, I think people have images in their heads where you might not be feminine so they're shocked but generally a lot of people are quite supportive. (Sophie)

In general life I can be quite shy and I don't think I look the type to do the sport, I don't really look very muscly or scary or anything like that. So I think I'm always underestimated a bit when I go in the ring and fight, and I think that's an advantage really because I maybe shock people when I step through those ropes and do what I do! So, [femininity] tends to work in my favour. (Holly)

Of wider significance in this respect was the claim from some of our interviewees that the performance of femininity, with its social

consequences of maintaining fighters' public identities as – in many of their own words – 'normal women', could destabilise sexist ideals. Effectively symbolising a re-articulated vision of what constitutes such a woman, the feminine *and* powerful fighter became an important symbol for our interviewees. Here, Rachel's view summarises this sentiment well in arguing that non-conformity to a model of becoming either overtly masculinised or avoiding MACS altogether for the sake of her femininity was effectively helping change attitudes about (all) other women's capabilities:

**In fact I think of myself as more of a woman because I see myself doing something for women, instead of just obeying a stereotype ... I think it's feminism, you know, pursuing something for ourselves and showing that normal everyday women are capable of doing something which a lot of people say we're not. I think it's a good thing what we're doing.**

Thus, doing femininity in specifically acceptable ways, which were understood as compatible with the embodiment of physical power through MACS training and simultaneously taken as a means of claiming a coherent identity as a woman *and* a fighter, became a means of illustrating, in Keeley's words, that 'girls can do this, too'. Such contextually legitimated versions of appropriate femininity were held up as evidence of a wider social value of women's participation ('it's feminism'), lending added importance to the accomplishment of feminine signifiers among these competitive fighters.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, the findings of our studies reveal how specific articulations of femininity are purposefully chosen by women participating in MACS, and deliberately enacted/enjoyed in accordance with their own self-authorised sense of identity. Many of our interviewees used language that framed femininity as something desirable and intrinsically valuable; they didn't want to have to 'go without', 'lose', or 'sacrifice' it to become a fighter. And, with this in mind, they articulated specific ways in which femininity could be happily accommodated with the demands of MACS participation. Critical of instances wherein certain aspects of femininity could obstruct training, or give a poor impression of women fighters to others, it was clear that feminine behaviours needed to be carefully negotiated in order to signify both 'woman' and 'fighter'. Furthermore, it was broadly noted that such successful gender performances bore value – they could help develop wider (female) participation in MACS; they might confer some competitive advantages in the ring; most of all they carried the potential to challenge sexist beliefs about women's capabilities and destabilise the hierarchal constructs through which sexual difference is commonly imagined.

To us, this illustrates a compelling example of a genuinely alternative iteration of femininity. The women we spoke to did not experience femininity as a means of correcting or apologising for their encroachment into 'masculine' terrain [e.g., Felshin 1974; Krane 2001], it was not a means of diluting the embodiment of physical power built through their training; rather, it served to signify to others that 'normal, everyday women' can be tough and powerful fighters. Echoing Kristine De Welde, we agree that – as an exercise in agency which defies the rigidity of gender binaries framed by the heterosexual matrix and the restrictive opportunities for identification which these provide – 'it was imperative for these women to redefine womanhood and femininity on their own terms' [De Welde 2003: 271]. Although laying claim to being 'normal' women carries heteronormative connotations with respect to the implicit stigmatisation of female masculinity, it nevertheless indicates a restructuring of the discursive possibilities enshrined by what 'normal' womanhood might otherwise involve. In other words, while moving within the parameters of normative gender construction, they began to undo its discursive relationship to women's subordination.

In a context of increasing mainstream visibility for women in high-profile combat sports [e.g., Cain 2005; Hope 2015; Jakubowska et al. 2016], and amidst on-going public debate over the appropriateness of using normative feminine imagery to promote sport participation to women [e.g., Sanghani 2014; Fullagar and Francombe-Webb 2015], we argue that findings such as these stand to make an important

contribution to the way in which femininity is understood within martial arts studies. While we do not deny that pressure to conform to feminine norms is often exerted on athletic women, nor that such a process can be restrictive or harmful to the development of their abilities and thus damaging to the gender-subversive potential of MACS (among other, related activities), we nevertheless argue that, in other cases, the exact opposite may be true: women can choose to be feminine, doing so on their own terms and in ways which potentially work in subversive directions. Thus, we believe that scholarly work on women's MACS and gender performance would do well to attend more closely to the manner in which the performance of alternative femininities by female fighters might work against the sexual hierarchies that their more orthodox counterparts are typically thought to preserve.

We conclude this article with a short comment on the limitations of the studies upon which it is based. As with all qualitative research, the subjective nature of the analysis we conducted must be considered, as it is entirely possible that other scholars might have understood and interpreted this data in different ways. Although our joint approach to re-analysing each other's empirical findings provided the opportunity to cross-validate ideas, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that the conclusions we have reached here are wrapped up in our own specific theoretical position and not, therefore, representative of all possible readings of these findings.

Also, our small overall sample size draws the generalizability of our findings into question, while the characteristics of this sample make for something of a partial view on contemporary gender construction given the heterosexuality and whiteness of the participants. With only four of our sample of 27 consisting of ethnic minority women, and only one identifying as openly lesbian, our studies are not well-placed to comment on the impact of sexual and cultural diversity on the construction of martial artists' femininities. Indeed, while these particular minority group women did not offer any notably contrasting viewpoints within the interviews conducted, the overall body of findings here might be reconsidered in terms of its latent whiteness and straightness had a larger and more diverse sample been included in the research, and/or if we had directly sought to problematize these intersectional phenomena in our primary research questions. Therefore, the relationships between whiteness, straightness, and femininity in the MACS milieu is something that could warrant specific investigation in future research efforts of this kind, as we have not made these phenomena explicit objects of analysis in this article. Despite these limitations, we hope that our research can provide a useful contribution to colleagues wishing to expand the literature on women, gender, and martial arts.

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